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Simon Carolan, Christine Evain

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Skimming content not quality: The production of a crowd-sourced database of study notes by university students

**Simon CAROLAN, Ecole Centrale de Nantes, simon.carolan@ec-nantes.fr
Christine EVAIN, Ecole Centrale de Nantes, christine.evain@ec-nantes.fr**

Study notes have been used by students for many years for the purposes of revision and self-study, enabling them to tackle the most challenging of texts and subject areas. These guides help students to ‘skim-read’ texts whilst allowing them insight into the structure of the plot and the semantics. Teachers are often critical of these guides: they consider them to be ‘shortcuts’ for procrastinating students, yet the guides can be of great benefit when integrated into the pedagogical process, becoming powerful tools for student development.

With careful planning, skim-reading mechanisms can be applied to learners of any language with positive results. In order to develop a coherent learning strategy, the following questions can be brought into consideration:

What skills are required for the study of abridged or synthesized literature?

What are the mechanisms that need to be put in place for successful ‘skim-reading’?

How does this learning strategy affect the cognitive development of the student?

What are the possibilities for collaborative work?

What are the outcomes of the learning process?

To what extent can the skills developed for skim-reading be considered as transferable skills?

We will look into learning strategies and especially those that encourage the student-driven production of study guides. Our article will be based on the findings of our “Skim-Reading” project at the Ecole Centrale de Nantes: this project allows for collaborative work leading to the building of a crowd-sourced database of guides, a project which is especially appealing to the upcoming generation of Digital Natives.

A key concept in this study will be to consider the appropriate use of tools that are developed both by teachers and by students including blogs, teaching platforms, document servers and social media. This will lead to distinct recommendations on incorporating technological tools into the data-mining process, the collaborative development phase and the promotion of the outcomes. Our research will be punctuated by the analyses and conclusions of leading pedagogues, neuroscientists and teaching professionals in relation to the development of innovative pedagogies and the integration of new technologies to the knowledge and information acquisition process.

Introduction

Ranging from abridged versions of literary classics to complete essay production tools, over the past few decades, study guides have become an undeniable part of the academic publishing landscape. This phenomenon is growing as learners become increasingly time-conscious and traditional learning mediums are forced to compete with new media and its growing monopoly

upon work and leisure time. Within this environment, study guides play an important role in maintaining a conveniently accessible path to exploring the literary canon.

The study guide market is currently dominated by a few major publishers and platforms including York Notes (an imprint and subsidiary of Pearson Education) and Spark Notes (a free-to-access web-based platform). These study guides encourage readership with promises of getting to the “heart of the text” whilst allowing users “to engage with the text in new and different ways”¹. They present their readers with summarized versions of poems, short stories, plays and novels that contain intermittent quotations and allow readers to effectively “skim-read” the material that is at their disposal. In addition, many of these study guides offer plot overviews, character assessments and textual and contextual analysis.

These tools are often viewed with disdain by academia who considers them to be synonymous with superficiality. Many universities have issued official statements, some warning of the dangers of “receiving and then regurgitating information” from sources that “represent, at best, a superficial treatment of the material.”² There are undeniable risks when using this kind of resource as even the most conscientious students may inadvertently fall into the trap of oversimplifying complex material but when correctly integrated into a more general pedagogical approach, study guides can prove to be effective ways for learners to assimilate large amounts of text in a short time, to revise previously studied texts or for non-native learners to access original language text in a comprehensible fashion.

Indeed, over the past few years, using similar techniques, English language specialists at the Ecole Centrale de Nantes have been opening their scientific students to the possibilities offered by the study of English literature within their more general engineering cursus. For many students, this has provided them with an opportunity to broaden their horizons and develop critical thinking skills as well as developing their linguistic mastery. Having witnessed the positive impact of such an initiative on their students, teachers at the Ecole Centrale de Nantes decided to embark upon a “skim-reading” experiment with their students in order to realize the full potential of the experience generated by the use of the mechanisms developed within study guides.

This article will articulate around the process developed for the skim-reading experiment, defining the learning mechanisms required for the successful undertaking of the experiment, the experimental environments and their specificities, the valorization of the accomplished work, the learning outcomes of the experiment and the optimization of the skim-reading process.

Learning Mechanisms

In order for us to explore skim-reading as an activity, it is necessary for us to define it. According to Wikipedia, “Skimming is a process of speed reading that involves visually searching the sentences of a page for clues to meaning... [It] results in lower comprehension rates, especially with information-rich reading material.” This is then contrasted with “another form of skimming”

¹ Product description for York Notes: <http://www.pearsoned.co.uk/bookshop/>

² *On the Problem of Using SparkNotes and Other Secondary Sources*, a set of guidelines established by the philosophy department of Gonzaga University, <http://guweb2.gonzaga.edu/faculty/mcreynolds/sparknotes.htm>

which “is that commonly employed by readers on the Web. This involves skipping over text that is less interesting or less relevant.”³ The Oxford Dictionary provides us with a clearer distinction between these two forms of skimming, differentiating between *skimming over* meaning to “deal with or treat (a subject) briefly or superficially” and *skimming*, meaning to “read (something) quickly so as to note only the important points”⁴. This difference in meaning is where a great deal of the skepticism surrounding the use of study guides arises. For our experiment, we want to encourage our students to discover, to highlight and to analyze the important points contained within the text. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, we shall retain the latter of the definitions that we shall refer to hereafter as “skim-reading”.

The skim-reading experiment that is the subject of this present article developed from a pedagogical practice that we regularly employ to teach short stories to our engineering students at the Ecole Centrale de Nantes⁵. Rather than presenting students with the entirety of the text, we present the students with selected extracts. These extracts represent key moments in the development of the story or its characters. They are presented to the students within the framework of a larger more anatomical approach to studying literature, analyzing the elements that constitute a successful story. This involves equipping the students with tools that allow them to identify and navigate between a macro level, which relies mainly on plot and character development with limited use of symbolism and a micro level, where symbolism comes into play in a much greater way, within the story. These two levels form the groundings for the exercise to be accomplished by the students.

A structural approach to literature is well-suited to engineers, who, in the majority of cases, have methodological and structural approaches to interacting with their surroundings. Indeed, structure is intrinsic with pedagogy. It is the leading anthropologist, William F. Hanks who claimed: “In a classical intellectualist theory, it is the individual mind that acquires mastery over processes of reasoning and description by internalizing and manipulating structures.”⁶ In line with this theory, we believed that by defining structural elements in the study of literature, students would be able to *reason* with the matter and by *internalizing* and bridging these structural elements through their own *descriptions* and summaries, students would be able to demonstrate their *mastery* of the content. To complete this process, a system would need to be developed that would allow students to *manipulate* their content by comparing it and contrasting it with the contributions of others.

Hanks asserts the aforementioned theory in his foreword to *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*, an analysis of the implicit and explicit learning contexts demonstrated through apprenticeship, containing theories that have driven a large part of this experiment.

³ Article on “Speed Reading”, Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Speed_reading

⁴ Definition of “skimming”, Oxford Dictionaries, <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/skim?q=skimming>

⁵ The Ecole Centrale de Nantes (<http://www.ec-nantes.fr/version-anglaise/>) is a graduate school of general engineering sciences. After having followed two or three year preparatory courses in Math and Physics, students enter the school to follow two years of courses in general engineering sciences. During their third year they can either choose a specialized course in a domain of engineering or management sciences, obtaining the equivalent of a Masters Degree in Engineering, or follow courses for a further two years in an affiliated engineering course abroad, obtaining the equivalent of a Masters Degree in Engineering both at the Ecole Centrale de Nantes and the partner establishment.

⁶ *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*, Lave, J., and Wenger, E., Cambridge University Press, 1991, p.15 (Foreword by William F. Hanks)

Within the context of this experiment, the engineering students at the Ecole Centrale de Nantes could indeed be considered as peripheral participants in the study of literature. They are tackling a subject that is foreign both in its language and its nature.

The methodology enables these peripheral participants, many of whom have not been in close contact with literary material for five years or more, to gain a privileged access to the literary corpus and peripheral participation, “as a place in which one moves towards more-intensive participation...is an empowering position.”⁷ By engaging in this process, we hope to engage our learners and to empower them with transferable skills that will be applicable to their mastery of cultural knowledge, language skills, analytical skills and other transferable skills whilst developing their curiosity for literature.

It is important at this point to stress that our objective in completing this experiment is not to revolutionize literary theory or learning mechanisms. The practices developed as part of this experiment call upon well-established analytical theories and pedagogical practices. Our objective is to study and promote a way of combining these practices that gives added value to the reading experience, providing readers with quality tools for study and personal development, tools that enable students to appreciate the difference between a “readerly” text and a “writerly” text.⁸

Reading has itself been the subject of a great deal of study in recent years as people imagine doomsday theories built around the death of the novel. Mark D. West and Catherine J. West, explore these different scenarios in their article on *Reading in the Internet Era*⁹. They argue for “nascent post-modern reading” to take inspiration from Medieval models where reading was selective yet thorough. This pertains to the philosophy that we wish to develop within the skim-reading experiment. Such a philosophy takes on all its importance when we consider the veritable mass of information that is at our disposal via the World Wide Web. In any case, whatever, form reading may take on in the future, as Joyce Milambiling points out, one thing is certain: “While we may need to change our conception of what reading is, it is far from being obsolete.”¹⁰

We will be presenting our conception of post-modern reading through the major tools developed within the framework of the experiment, notably the web-based platform. This platform is particularly attractive to the ‘Wikipedia’ generation of digital migrants. They are comfortable

⁷ *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*, Lave, J., and Wenger, E., Cambridge University Press, 1991, p.37

⁸ In his analytical study *S/Z*, Roland Barthes develops the notions of readerly and writerly texts. “Barthes argues that most texts are *readerly* texts. Such texts are associated with classic texts that are presented in a familiar, linear, traditional manner, adhering to the status quo in style and content. Meaning is fixed and pre-determined so that the reader is a site merely to receive information. These texts attempt, through the use of standard representations and dominant signifying practices, to hide any elements that would open up the text to multiple meaning... [W]riterly texts reveal those elements that the readerly attempts to conceal. The reader, now in a position of control, takes an active role in the construction of meaning. The stable meaning, or metanarratives, of readerly texts is replaced by a proliferation of meanings and a disregard of narrative structure. There is a multiplicity of cultural and other ideological indicators (codes) for the reader to uncover.” (Roland Barthes: *Understanding Text – Readerly and Writerly Text*, <http://www.arts.uwaterloo.ca>)

⁹ *Reading in the Internet Era: Toward a Medieval Mode of Understanding*, West, M. D., and West, C. J., The International Journal of the Book, Vol. 6:4, Common Ground Publishing, 2009

¹⁰ *Something Old, Something New: Textbooks and E-resources in Higher Education*, Milambiling, J., The International Journal of the Book, Vol 9:2, 2012

with using these tools that are playing an increasingly important role in their everyday lives. Participative web-based platforms can be met with mixed reactions as many conceive of them as being tools invented by and for the computer literate. When developing the platform and demonstrating it to the students, we felt it important to take the time to discuss participatory culture, the origins of which can be traced back much further than the invention of the World Wide Web or the Internet. Participatory culture can be traced back to the oral traditions of our distant ancestors and the social media that we are confronted with in the modern world is just the coded transpositions of a code that has existed since the dawn of humanity.

We had to bear this legacy in mind and consider the interactions that were most adapted to our project. In order to achieve this, we looked to the works of our contemporaries in the matter. In her article on the development of multi-level scalable structures in text¹¹, Florentina Armaselu proposes a system that develops a “geometric” approach to literature, “allowing variable points of view and degrees of involvement with the text.” This system leads to the production of multiple versions of a given text. These versions are interconnected and each version corresponds to a different level of detail in the text. As the readers “zoom-in”, they can either obtain a more detailed version of the text or are confronted with different points of accentuation. All of the different versions are produced from the original text and reproduced in varying lengths. The user is able to shift from version to version for a specific section of the text, or for the entirety of the text.

It is on a similar basis to this that we envisaged our skim-reading experiment. However, our platform contains several major differences, notably the fact that the shortened or abridged sections are interconnected with summaries that bridge the gaps between them. This crucial difference affords a greater level of control to the reader, ensuring that they are always aware of the nature of the missing content and can then make conscious decisions as to which elements they wish to discover on the micro level and which they wish to discover on the macro level.

This decision making process also needs to occur on the production side and this necessity justifies the structural approach to the study of literature that is promoted within this study and that is largely inspired by our desire to encourage students to make better use of analytical tools such as those developed by Genette and Barthes but also more practical creative writing tools, such as John Truby’s anatomological methodology.

Roland Barthes is generally considered as the champion of structuralist theory and the author of the five codes theory¹². This theory attempts to establish a set of codes that can be used to analyze the structure of a given story, contrasting it against other works in order to determine how, through differentiation, the different elements combine to produce and convey meaning. Truby, a screenwriter and director, turned scriptwriting consultant and public speaker, distinguished three semiotic codes for the development of enigmatic stories, notably for the world of cinema. This simplified version of Barthes’ codes refers more generally to plot development, character development and symbolism and led to the creation of a twenty-two step methodology

¹¹ *The Text as a Scalable Structure: New ways of Storytelling?*, Florentina Armaselu, The International Journal of the Book, Vol. 4:4, Common Ground Publishing, 2007

¹² *S/Z*, Barthes, R., Editions du Seuil, 1970, p.23. The five codes are classified by Barthes as the hermeneutic (mysterious), proairetic (tension building), semantic (extended meaning), symbolic (antithesis) and cultural (truthful) codes.

demonstrated through the publication of *The Anatomy of Story*¹³. These theories are compared and contrasted within the framework of the experiment and are then applied to a series of chosen texts that are ultimately uploaded to the skim-reading platform.

Experimental Environments

Having established the parameters of the experiment and our objectives, we were able to start the development phase. In order to realize the full potential of the skim-reading experiment, we selected two sample publics for the completion of the exercise:

- (i) The students of the Religion and Literature in North America (eRELNA) course, an elective course offered to second year students at the Ecole Centrale de Nantes.
- (ii) The students who chose to complete the exercise as part of their semestrial autonomous work project (TA) for their English course¹⁴.

These sample publics were chosen as they represent two distinct communities requiring two distinct processes. This would also allow us to contrast the different experiences, allowing for critical analysis of the learning mechanisms and the optimization of the learning processes for future students.

The Religion and Literature in North American Elective

The students studying the elective course provide an interesting public for study as, having chosen to embark on a specialized literature and literary culture course that is dispensed to them in English, they are receptive to the content of the course and the skim-reading experiment that represents part of their assessments for this course. The students are in the second semester of their second year at the Ecole Centrale de Nantes and demonstrate developed analytical skills and a certain degree of autonomy.

The exercise is presented to them during an interactive lecture where they discover the theoretical underpinning to the structural analysis of literature and selected quotations from a given text that they will be working with. The students reassemble the selected extracts in the correct order to form the complete story, bearing in mind what they have learnt about narrative structure. They are then able to check the order of the selected quotes against the original text, discussing the text that bridges these selected quotes. In small groups, they then transform the text between two selected quotes, abridging the bridges through the creation of summaries. Each group presents their work to the other groups, allowing the group as a whole to undertake critical analysis and debate. This process is orchestrated by the teacher and leads to the creation of a definitive version.

The exercise is then repeated by the students in their own time, but this time, they are to complete the process in small groups, with texts of their own choice¹⁵ and it is the students who select the

¹³ *The Anatomy of Story*, Truby, J., Faber and Faber, 2007

¹⁴ At the Ecole Centrale de Nantes, the students are required to spend twenty-five percent of their time working on relevant autonomous projects for each of the courses that they follow. In order to complete these projects, they are assigned tutors who offer advice and support during the semester and analyze their achievements, following a presentation of the outcomes by the students at the end of the semester.

¹⁵ To avoid issues of copyright infringement, the students are required to use texts that are in the public domain.

extracts from the micro level, in order to form the macro level of alternate selected quotations and summaries. The students are also encouraged to explore the context of their chosen text, investigating biographical information on the author and historical information on the story setting, searching for clues to meaning or subtext. Their different versions of the text and the additional information are subsequently presented to the group in the more formal presentation settings described in the valorization section.

The Semestrial Autonomous Work Project

The students who chose the skim-reading activity for their semestrial autonomous work project are an interesting study group as they are students from all three year groups at the Ecole Centrale de Nantes who have varied profiles. The students have all consciously chosen this activity amongst a dozen different subjects that all contain a cultural component and the necessity of completing the given task in English. They complete these tasks in groups of three to six students.

These students are presented with the activity in a very different format. They are informed of the activity via a blog (<http://taprojects.blogs.ec-nantes.fr/>) and are redirected to a specialized blog (The Skim-Reading section of <https://pedagogie.ec-nantes.fr/book-industry/>) that contains detailed instructions for the successful completion of the activity and a sample of the work to be accomplished. The students are able to contact designated tutors throughout the project in order to obtain guidance and assistance. Once the task has been completed, they upload their contribution to the platform and use this content as the basis for a presentation that they perform for their designated tutor for assessment.

The Specificities of the Samples

The particularities of these sample groups require the development of two distinct pedagogies. In the first case, the theoretical underpinning is presented in a detailed manner. The students discover the process through “in-præsentia” learning which is presented through the collaborative completion of an interactive example. Tutors are available to provide guidance in the accomplishment in the task upon student request. Here, we are presented with a case of situated learning or learning by example as the students are exposed to a specific situation in the omnipresence of the teacher and through practical application they are able to internalize the methodology and the structures in order to conveniently reproduce the task in an external environment.

In the second case, the theoretical underpinning is presented in a concise manner. The students discover the process through “in-absentia” learning which is presented through a sample of the work they are to accomplish. Tutors are available to provide guidance in the accomplishment in the task upon student request. Here, we are presented with a case of project based learning as the students instigate the completion of the task with the potential facilitation of the teacher, encouraging the students to develop their investigative and creative thinking skills.

In addition, it is important to note that in the case of the Semestrial Autonomous Work Project, there is a risk that the guidelines may be misinterpreted. In order to avoid this kind of situation

that is all but inevitable in a minority of cases, the guidelines have undergone an optimization process with successive improvements before the establishment of a workable edition. There are clear limits to the number of guidelines that can be absorbed and enacted by students so these guidelines have the vocation of being clear yet concise.

Through the comparison of these distinct learning situations, we will be able to establish the perimeters in which learning occurs both in and around the exercise and how the role of the educator or “master” influences upon the learning outcomes of the student or “apprentice”¹⁶.

Valorization – A Multi-Channel Process

Upon the production of their interpretations of the selected texts, the students, who have been working in small groups until now, are required to undertake a valorization process in a wider context. In the case of the Religion and Literature in North America Elective, the valorization process revolves around student-teacher and peer-to-peer interactions that are orchestrated by the teachers and, in certain cases, by the students themselves. On the contrary, in the case of the Semestrial Autonomous Work Project, the valorization process is highly centered upon student-teacher interactions.

The valorization process is an integral part of the skim-reading experiment, consists in:

- (i) Opening student reflections to a wider public,
- (ii) Confronting the students with the reality of the reader,
- (iii) Mutualizing student generated content.

Opening the student reflections to a wider public

As part of the valorization process, the students of the Religion and Literature in North America Elective are required to present their works to their peers and teachers and the students of the Semestrial Autonomous Work Project are required to present their work to their tutor. This is a crucial part of the learning process as it demonstrates that the student has completed the internalization process and is able to manipulate the structures that they have encountered, as described within classical intellectualist theory. The students need to effectively demonstrate that they have understood the text, that they have identified the underlying structure of the text and that they have established how the elements work together to produce meaning.

They achieve this through a variety of skills that they are able to demonstrate through the presentation of their work, including:

- (i) Contextualization

¹⁶ Our conception of “master” and “apprentice” calls largely upon their positioning as defined by Lave and Wenger. To appreciate this conception, we invite the reader to consider the following quote: “To take a decentered view of master-apprentice relations leads to an understanding that mastery resides not in the master but in the organization of the community of practice of which the master is part: The master as the locus of authority (in several senses) is, after all, as much a product of the conventional, centered theory of learning as is the individual learner. Similarly, a decentered view of the master as pedagogue moves the focus of analysis away from teaching and onto the intricate structuring of a community’s learning resources.” *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*, Lave, J., and Wenger, E., Cambridge University Press, 1991, p.94

They demonstrate their ability to place a text with a given context or given contexts that build the basis for an interpretation of the content.

(ii) Synthesization

They demonstrate their ability to isolate the relevant information that is required to undertake the interpretative process.

(iii) Interpretation

They demonstrate their ability to gather relevant information from the text and its context in order to provide clues to its meaning.

(iv) Summarization

They demonstrate their ability to differentiate between essential and non-essential knowledge and their awareness of the different readerships that may occur around a given text.

(v) Application

They demonstrate that they are able to apply all of the above skills within the framework of a given exercise that imposes a certain number of constraints.

Confronting the students with the reality of the reader

Once the students have demonstrated their aptitude in these essential skills through the presentation of their interpretation, a critical debate can ensue. This debate effectively covers both the interpretation of the text and the major themes that the text develops. It is important that the students are able to interact with the material. This mechanism for increased involvement will help them move from the realm of “peripheral participation” to the heart of the subject, empowering them in the process.

The criticism that the students’ work is subject to in this part of the process comes from multiple sources and takes on multiple forms. It is important at this point to distinguish between the criticism that is provided by the teacher or the “master” and the criticism that is provided by the other students or the “peers”.

The master provides key insight into the students’ work, allowing the students to improve upon their work by proposing concrete linguistic, structural and analytical advice. This advice or feedback is delivered in multiple forms. Upon the presentation of the work, the master provides a direct qualitative assessment of the accomplished work. During the ensuing debate, they raise questions or stimulate the other students to cover subject areas that they consider of importance. As masters, they also raise pertinent questions that will allow the students to explore areas that they may have sidelined or ignored. This feedback process is completed in the weeks following the presentation with suggestions for the correction and copyediting of the text, the publishing of the master’s comments and the giving of a grade.

The peers provide the points of view of both the readers and the fellow authors. As readers, they can contrast the students’ interpretation with their own and provide key feedback on both the scannability of the text and the pertinence of the content. As fellow authors, they can provide suggestions on methodology or structure that are based on the relative success of their own approach.

These mechanisms of constructive criticism and feedback are vital as they enable the students to distance themselves from their work, allowing them to forge an objective critical overview of the text. This is incredibly important as it encourages the students to make successive improvements to their work in the lead up to the final step in the immediate valorization process, the uploading of the work to the database.

Mutualizing student generated content

A mandatory step in the completion of the skim-reading exercise is the uploading of the content onto a web-based server. This was enabled through the development of software and a dedicated database that allows students, after a verification process, to upload their contributions to the database and to visualize their content and the content of other students. This software was developed with several objectives in mind.

The first objective of the platform is to allow students the possibility of navigating between the macro and the micro levels. This can be achieved efficiently through a web-based system as it is easily searchable, scannable and allows for convenient cross referencing. As Florentina Armaselu indicates for her system, this is a “starting point for new ways of storytelling, allowing the reader to adjust his proximity and distance as an *observer* in the textual space.”¹⁷ This navigation needs to be fluid, seamless and occur “in a relatively stable context”. To achieve this, our web-based platform allows the students to change levels for a text in its entirety or for a particular paragraph or section of the text without reloading the page.

The second objective of the platform is to allow students the possibility of viewing the work of other students through the creation of an anthology of texts and their associated study guides. Students are able to access all of the texts contained within the platform, providing them with access to study guides for several dozens of texts. In this way, the skim-reading experiment is leading to the development of a reading resource, providing users with quality peer-reviewed content.

The third objective of this platform is to allow students to benefit from the community aspects of this platform. Participatory culture is particularly strong within the generation of digital migrants that we are currently teaching. Allowing them to interact with the content in the classroom environment and to continue this conversation outside of the classroom is essential to student development. As Hanks indicates: “Once we see discourse production as a social and cultural practice, and not as a second-order representation of practice, it becomes clear that it must be configured along with other kinds of work in the overall matrix of performance. It also becomes important to investigate retellings and discussions that take place in and around performance events, and between learners and their respective communities.”¹⁸ In order for the students to obtain the full utility of the experience, they need to be able to relate and to adapt the content of the platform to environments that are beyond the periphery of the school environment.

¹⁷ *The Text as a Scalable Structure: New ways of Storytelling?*, Florentina Armaselu, The International Journal of the Book, Vol. 4:4, Common Ground Publishing, 2007

¹⁸ *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*, Lave, J., and Wenger, E., Cambridge University Press, 1991, p.22 (Foreword by William F. Hanks)

Learning Outcomes

In 2011, the first wave of the skim-reading experiment provided us with a promising outlook. As a result of the exercise, students had produced multi-level versions of a dozen short stories or short novels. The students had completed the process successfully and their feedback on the content of the course and the pertinence of the assessment procedure was positive. Many of the students developed confidence in reading literature in a foreign language and continue to invest time and energy in this fruitful activity.

The teaching team at the Ecole Centrale de Nantes was pleased with the results of this initial experience and was also pleased to see a real dynamism building up around the activity. There remained, however, serious concerns about the heterogeneity of contributions. The students were working in groups of three to six people and certain groups had decided to allocate chapters or sections of their text to different people within the group. This meant that there were major disparities in the size and quality of the summaries from one chapter to another, the majority of which could not be justified by variations in the original content.

By analyzing the processes of the different groups, as one could imagine, we were able to establish that the quality of the work produced depended a great deal on the cohesion of the group's members and their ability to co-operate. As a teaching team we would have to remediate this issue for future groups if we were to create the high quality reading tool that we were aiming for. This would surely warrant the development of a specification within the guidelines and integration of additional resources for the development of the working ethics within the groups.

If we now consider the differences between “in-præsentia” and “in-absentia” learning processes we can naturally conclude that the Religion and Literature in North America Elective students benefitted highly from both the presence of the “master” who enabled and encouraged them to go deeper into their study of the text and the highly active participation of their peers in the valorization process that allowed them to “fine-tune” their interpretation of the text to a wide readership. For the Semestrial Autonomous Work Project, the peer-to-peer elements of this instance depended largely on the motivation of the students to seek this form of interaction. This is equally true of their interaction with the teacher as outside of the occasional progress meetings and the final presentation of their work, the interaction between the “in-absentia” student and the tutor depends largely on the student's motivation to seek this kind of engagement. Consequently, the scope of the contributions was somewhat restricted in comparison with the “in-præsentia” students. Nevertheless, the contributions of the “in-absentia” students are highly adequate, in particular when we take into consideration that they benefit from a smaller timeframe for the completion of the exercise.

In spite of the aforementioned issues, the quality of the contributions was high. The students had received correction and copy editing advice from their tutors and the collaborative aspects of the valorization process ensured that students received regular feedback from both their teachers and their peers. The students demonstrated an increased aptitude in the completion of the associated activities and were able to apply the developed skills in environments beyond that of the initial study.

They were not the only ones to benefit from this experience. William F. Hanks raises the following interrogation: “How do the masters of apprentices themselves change through acting as co-learners and therefore how does the skill being mastered change in the process? The larger community of practitioners reproduces itself through the formation of apprentices yet it would presumably be transformed as well. Legitimate peripheral participation does not explain these changes but it has the virtue of making them all but inevitable.”¹⁹

Indeed, for the pedagogical team working on this project, this has been a transformational experience and a creative dynamism has built up around the project. The experiment is fuelling the development of the anthological platform leading to the integration of innovative functionalities and a widening of the scope for production. A research team has been created to investigate the possibilities for development, analyzing the potential for integration into other circles of the education sector and applications in industry. In order to achieve this, new partnerships are flourishing in the local area, in particular with other educational establishments that will further widen the scope of this exercise.

These developments are intrinsic with our belief that innovation should center on collaboration and community. As Lave and Wenger stated in their treatise on situated learning: “We are persuaded that rethinking schooling from the perspective afforded by legitimate peripheral participation will turn out to be a fruitful exercise. Such an analysis would raise questions about the place of schooling in the community at large in terms of possibilities for developing identities of mastery”²⁰

(Re)Writing Guidelines

As a conclusion, we will consider the evolution of the skim-reading experiment. The skim-reading experiment presents promising avenues for present and future exploration. The dynamism that is developing around this activity is leading us to open up our experimentations to a larger public in varying contexts.

The most recent development in the skim-reading experiment is the use of the TED Talks website.²¹ This website contains over one thousand filmed talks carried out by chosen public speakers and experts on their specialist subjects. The different talks typically last for less than twenty minutes and are performed in front of a studio audience before being uploaded onto the TED website. They are then available for everyone to enjoy under the Creative Commons License²².

¹⁹ *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*, Lave, J., and Wenger, E., Cambridge University Press, 1991, p.15 (Foreword by William F. Hanks)

²⁰ *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*, Lave, J., and Wenger, E., Cambridge University Press, 1991, p.44

²¹ For more information, please visit www.ted.com

²² These licenses that represent a simplified version of copyright law, allow content providers to make their content available to the public and to state clearly how the public may use or re-use this content. For more information, please visit <http://creativecommons.org/>

The nature of the TED License means that the TED Talks may be used within a classroom environment without obtaining specific permission and teachers may develop different activities around these videos, embedding the videos in their own websites. TED positively encourages teachers to use this material and is currently developing special tools to help teachers create exercises and manage the use of these exercises by their students.²³

In this way, TED is reaching out to the community and encouraging the collaboration around its website and content. This has led to the creation and development of many additional features and contents. These features and contents, known as TED Initiatives, include TED Fellows, TED Conversations, TEDx Events and the feature that forms the object of our study, The TED Open Translation Project.

This project calls on volunteer collaborators across the world to produce transcripts of videos in English and around one hundred different languages. These transcripts are available both as full version transcripts and as closed caption subtitles. As described on the website, TED is hoping to spread its influence beyond the English speaking world and the TED Open Translation Project that they are using to achieve this, “is one of the most comprehensive attempts by a major media platform to subtitle and index online video content. It’s also a groundbreaking effort in the public, professional use of volunteer translation.”²⁴

At the Ecole Centrale de Nantes, we want to offer our students the chance to be part of these groundbreaking developments by encouraging them to complete the skim-reading exercise with material from the TED website. The teachers regularly develop exercises and activities around the TED website as it provides an unrivalled anthology of high quality material that can be conveniently used in the classroom environment. In addition, the students engage deeply with the material at their disposal and search to replicate this experience outside of the classroom environment.

We therefore call upon the students to complete the skim-reading experiment with material from this website but rather than selecting one text as they had done previously, we ask them to select a theme in relation to the given course. For example, for the Religion and Literature in North America Elective, students are asked to choose a theological theme. They are then required to choose three talks based on that given theme and to produce summarized versions of these talks. These talks are then to be presented to the group and contrasted in order to demonstrate how the ideas of the different speakers conflict or converge. The presentation is then completed through a debate on the chosen theme, allowing the students to interact with the material and to produce their own interpretations of the subject matter. In a similar fashion, students are then required to upload their contributions to the platform.

The use of TED in the skim-reading experiment is to be seen as a natural progression of the initial experiment. By completing this experiment we are putting three key theories of Hanks, Lave and Wenger into practice:

- (i) Situated Learning and the Wider Community

²³ For a demonstration of these features and to create your own account, please visit <http://ed.ted.com/>

²⁴ Information provided by TED on the Open Translation Project, <http://www.ted.com/pages/287>

“Once we see discourse production as a social and cultural practice, and not as a second-order representation of practice, it becomes clear that it must be configured along with other kinds of work in the overall matrix of performance. It also becomes important to investigate retellings and discussions that take place in and around performance events, and between learners and their respective communities.”²⁵

By encouraging our students to engage with the wider community, they are able to transpose their skills to situations outside their habitual environment and to investigate the relevance of their material to communities of practice that are beyond the immediate community of practice that is formed by their peers.

(ii) Learning “in-situ” or “by doing”

“Quite simply, if learning is about increased access to performance, then the way to maximize learning is to perform, not to talk about it.”²⁶

By involving our students in performance activities and asking them to apply their knowledge and acquired skills to active “living” material, we are multiplying the performance opportunities for our students. In addition, this activity allows them, through mimicry, to develop their public speaking skills.

(iii) Engaging with the master

“Insofar as learning really does consist in the development of portable interactive skills, it can take place even when participants fail to share a common code. The apprentice's ability to understand the master's performance depends not on their possessing the same representation of it, or of the objects it entails, but rather on their engaging in the performance in congruent ways.”²⁷

In the TED activity, the students are presented with dual masters; the teacher and the speaker. The students are able to engage in the performance through the presentation of the speaker, a qualified presenter and practitioner as well as with their teacher, a qualified audience and practitioner. This engagement allows the student to develop a clear practical representation of their position in relation to the material.

This first experimental phase is coming to fruition and as the project develops and benefits from these satellite experiences, we are looking to the future of the experiment. The TED Open Translation Project will also us to open our experimentations to different learning contexts and languages. In addition, we are currently exploring the integration of scientific material that comes with its own sets of constraints and challenges.

As we develop the experiment, widening its scope, we will be able to benefit from the expertise of the communities that we reach. There are many lessons that can and will be drawn from this initial experience. For now, the most important lesson that we have learnt is that by embracing the tools used by our students and developing them with time-old and trusted theories and techniques, we can integrate them into educational environments, through “blended learning”, engaging twenty-first century learners in creative new ways.

²⁵ *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*, Lave, J., and Wenger, E., Cambridge University Press, 1991, p.22 (Foreword by William F. Hanks)

²⁶ *Ibid.*, P.22

²⁷ *Ibid.*, P.21

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